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UNCLAS HO CHI MINH CITY 001077

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP (HUHTALA); EAP/PD (SKIPPER, GRADISHER, WELTON, FURGAL); EAP/BCLTV (GAGNON, ADAMS, DUNLAP)

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: KPAQ PREL SENV OPRC VM

SUBJECT: GVN LAUNCHES MASSIVE AGENT ORANGE MEDIA CAMPAIGN, BUT FEW ARE LISTENING

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The Government of Vietnam has launched a vigorous media campaign to whip up support for the Agent Orange lawsuit in a New York Federal Court, but our contacts and (wo)man on the street in Ho Chi Minh City remain largely unmoved, tending to be more preoccupied with quality of life issues such as education, trade relations and technology. Mass organizations are "fronting" the campaign, but the GVN is not only the primary force behind the media barrage but has also issued specific instructions to media institutions to mask government involvement, according to PAS media sources. End summary.

¶2. (U) On August 4, media in southern Vietnam began a media campaign to highlight the Agent Orange case pending against U.S. corporations in federal court in Brooklyn, New York. Each day there are articles highlighting victims, announcing mass organization rallies, and publishing interviews with both Vietnamese and Americans who are speaking out against the use of Agent Orange during the war. Additionally, the newly minted Agent Orange Day of August 10 attracted significant media coverage, with heavy focus on Agent Orange events and programs in HCMC. For example, the Labor Federation and the War Remnants Museum in HCMC held a ceremony to raise funds for Agent Orange victims and to collect signatures to support the lawsuit. That same day the Vietnamese Alliance of Friendship Organizations announced a campaign to collect 2 million signatures to support Vietnamese Agent Orange Victims.

¶3. (SBU) A correspondent for a leading paper in HCMC informed us that the GVN issued an order to editors to mobilize this campaign, but at the same time not to make it appear that the GVN was behind it. This explains the apparent active involvement of "mass organizations" in what is clearly a command performance, at least in HCMC.

¶4. (SBU) A quick survey of contacts indicates that bread and butter issues continue to drive not only the city's leadership but also the average person on the street. For example, an editor of a major HCMC daily told us that the city remains focused on the future and that readers are actually far more concerned about issues such as traffic safety, education, visas to the U.S. for study and business, and bilateral trade issues. Similarly, business contacts have told us that the best way to bring about healing between the two countries is through vigorous trade which will do more for the relationship than any amount of aid or apologies.

¶5. (SBU) Perhaps indicative of the government-ordered nature of the media campaign, we have not received a single request for further information about Agent Orange from either media or other contacts. In addition, despite the government's push to enlist online supporters of an Agent Orange petition, to date the effort has netted only 10 percent of the stated 2 million-signature goal.

¶6. (SBU) Comment: Based on the above assessment, we will keep our Agent Orange guidance close at hand for if-asked use, but we will focus our public diplomacy efforts on issues that resonate such as helping to improve education, encouraging study in the U.S., explaining U.S. trade policy, highlighting our humanitarian assistance programs, and promoting the development of civil society. End comment.

WINNICK